Introduction

I wish to put forward a specific proposal within the remit of the current very broad inquiry being made by the Constitution Committee. I think consideration should be given to adjusting the electoral quota for Scottish constituencies at Westminster. With the advent of the Scottish Parliament the electoral quota was altered by the Scotland Act 1998 to parity with the remainder of the UK, thus reducing the number of Scottish constituencies from 71 to 59. The current boundary review reducing the size of the House of Commons from 650 to 600 involves proposed proportionate reductions in Scotland from 59 to 52, retaining parity within the UK. I would suggest that because Scotland has its own Parliament with considerable and increasing responsibilities the number of MPs from Scotland should be further reduced, perhaps to around 30. In support of this view I would draw attention to the following points:

1. This follows the precedent adopted for Northern Ireland in 1922 and sustained throughout the period when the Parliament at Stormont existed. After the imposition of direct rule Northern Ireland’s representation was eventually adjusted to be in line with the general UK quota. This proposal for Scotland therefore has precedent within the British Parliamentary system.

2. Solutions to the problem of EVEL seem elusive. The suggestions made give rise to excessive complexities, anomalies and probable unintended side effects. The potential introduction of differentiation in the rights and privileges of members from different parts of the UK is fraught with danger. The proposal made above may seem crude by comparison, but it should help to provide some reassurance to the electorate in other parts of the UK that Scotland is not in a position to exert unreasonable influence within the UK parliament.

3. There is a natural justice about this proposal, both from the point of view of the electorates concerned and MPs. It seems strange that MPs who represent a part of the UK which has its own Parliament with substantial and increasing powers should have the same electoral quota as other MPs. The normal constituency role of MPs for seats in Scotland is shared with MSPs. Electors resident in Scotland (such as myself) have this additional layer of representation through our MSPs, which we ought to use in relation to all matters where responsibility rests primarily with the Scottish Parliament.

4. In so far as one reason for the yet to be implemented sixth boundary review was to “reduce the cost of politics” by reducing the number of MPs, it seems curious to leave this double and undiluted representation in place. Taxpayers pay for 129 MSPs as well as for 59 MPs from Scotland.

Conclusion
Though the current Scottish Government would no doubt oppose any diminution in the number of MPs from Scotland, it would seem to me that in principle the case for doing this is very strong. Furthermore, this does seem the most practical step to take in the face of the problems posed by Evel. And I would suggest it is a solution more in conformity with the nature of British Constitutional development than elaborate procedural mechanisms. In the context of proposals for considerable further devolution, it seems extraordinary not to establish the principle that adjustments to the level of representation at Westminster where devolved Parliaments exist should take place.

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